

**STATEMENT FOR SECRETARY MICHAEL CHERTOFF
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
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Introduction

Chairman Young, Ranking Member Oberstar, and members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the response to Katrina and the steps we need to take to improve our nation's preparedness and response capabilities.

Earlier this week, I announced a plan for enhancing the capabilities of the Federal Emergency Management Agency to better support State and local emergency response during a catastrophic event or major disaster or emergency.

These changes are designed to not only provide better tools and stronger capabilities to the men and women of FEMA, but to further accelerate the integration of the Department's preparedness capabilities so that in the future we can effectively respond to emergencies and disasters of any kind and provide assistance in a coordinated and timely fashion.

The fact of the matter is that whether we are responding to an act of nature or an act of man, the Department's preparedness functions must be integrated and not stove-piped, they must be all-hazards, and they must extend across the full spectrum of prevention, protection, response and recovery.

We must have a unified strategy and approach for incident management at DHS and a common operating picture of events among our agencies and our partners. As we continue to integrate the lessons of Katrina, we now have an opportunity to refine and re-tool DHS – including FEMA – so that we can effectively meet the needs of states and the American people in the future.

Response Highlights

Now, we have already seen how teamwork and partnerships can produce striking results. While many things did not work well in the response to Katrina, many of our agencies performed at an exceptional level working together.

For example, the Coast Guard rescued more than 33,000 people in its response to Katrina – six times the number of people it rescued in all of 2004. At its peak, Coast Guard assets supporting the Katrina response totaled 65 aircraft, approximately 30 cutters, approximately 100 boats, and nearly 5,000 personnel.

FEMA coordinated the rescue of more than 6,500 people and for the first time deployed all 28 of its Urban Search and Rescue teams for a single event. The combined rescues by

FEMA, the Coast Guard, and many other federal, state and local first responders and volunteers – totals almost 40,000 people, or seven times the number of people rescued during the Florida hurricanes in 2004.

Within the first six days of the response, FEMA also assisted in the delivery of more than 28 million pounds of ice, 8 1/2 million meals, and 4 million gallons of water. This exceeds the combined totals for the entire recovery operation during Hurricane Andrew.

In addition, the Transportation Security Administration helped organize “Operation Air Care,” the largest domestic civilian airlift ever in our nation’s history. More than 22,000 stranded evacuees were lifted to safety from the New Orleans Airport. These efforts were also supported by the Federal Air Marshal Service, the Department of Transportation, the Air Transport Association, and some of our nation’s largest air carriers.

Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement also provided a combined 1,300 law enforcement officers to New Orleans to help maintain order, conduct search and rescue operations, and protect critical assets until additional National Guard troops could be mobilized. And the United States Secret Service provided strategic aid and support at critical locations, including the Superdome in New Orleans and the Astrodome in Houston.

These accomplishments were the work of the thousands of dedicated Americans who represent the best of the Department of Homeland Security. They are dedicated, they are professional, and all of them have made tremendous personal sacrifices to serve a cause greater than themselves. As we consider the totality of the response, we should not overlook their efforts.

Shortcomings

Let there be no mistake – Katrina was the 100 year storm that we all feared. It revealed what I told Congress and the American people in July – that we are not where we need to be in our ability to manage catastrophic events. As a result, we need to make sure we are building critical capabilities in the short and long term that will allow us to effectively respond to ultra-catastrophic events as well as more common dangers we face.

This tragedy emphasized how critical it is that we ensure our planning and response capabilities perform with seamless integrity and efficiency in any type of disaster situation – even one of cataclysmic nature.

Furthermore, it emphasized the importance of having accurate, timely and reliable information about conditions on the ground, the lack of which frustrated our best efforts to coordinate the response with our State and local counterparts.

In addition, although the Department of Homeland Security pre-positioned significant numbers of personnel, assets and resources before the hurricane made landfall, we now know our capabilities were simply overwhelmed by the magnitude of this storm, including logistics, claims management, contracting, and communications capabilities.

Over the past months, there has been a great deal of discussion about what worked and what didn't. I can assure you that we at the Department are our own harshest critics. We're committed to using the lessons learned from Katrina to increase our ability to plan for and respond to catastrophic events.

Federal Role

Of course, we must also make significant improvements at the Federal level to improve our ability to effectively assist our State and local counterparts in their response. To accomplish this important goal, I believe our most urgent priority in the near term is to take a hard, honest look at what we can do to improve our response capability and make substantial progress toward this goal by next hurricane season.

We must be able to provide support and assistance to disaster victims, identify the most urgent needs, and get resources into those areas quickly. We must also communicate effectively with our partners and have greater confidence in the information we rely upon to make decisions.

Many of these improvements will happen through stronger Federal, State, local and private sector partnerships and a shared plan for moving forward. But we also need to make some changes in Washington.

DHS and FEMA

We have identified a number of issues within FEMA, including a series of long-term policy issues that we must address with Congress. Obviously, decisions about these policy issues will await completion of Congressional and Administration after-action reviews. But some issues need to be addressed and their resolution underway by the beginning of hurricane season.

FEMA is not – nor has it ever been – a first responder. For 25 years, under our legal and constitutional framework, FEMA has worked to support State and local first responders during a disaster and provides assistance when a State makes a formal request for support.

But when State and local capabilities are clearly overwhelmed, as was the case in Katrina, the Federal government must be prepared to assume responsibility for some aspects of the response. And that means DHS must be able to function effectively, it must be able to provide assistance in a timely manner, and when a potential disaster looms, it must be prepared to lean forward and get help and supplies into the pipeline before a formal request is made.

Three elements are foundational. First, we must complete the integration of a unified incident command at DHS. In creating DHS and bringing incident management into one place, Congress had it right. Just as intelligence functions were stove-piped before 9-11, incident management has been stove-piped even after the formation of DHS.

We need to better integrate our incident management functions. We must have a common operating picture and a clear chain of command for managing incidents, especially catastrophes. And we must have a unity of purpose across our Department.

Second, we must improve operational capabilities and become a 21st century Department – with the focus, discipline, and technology that are the hallmarks of all great 21st century organizations.

Third, we must not lose sight of the need to foster our employees – some of the most talented, dedicated public servants in the Federal government. They are our best asset, and many of them have decades of experience for which there is no substitute. But these men and women deserve better tools to match their skills and needs.

Therefore, in the near future, we will be making several major changes to how we do business to support a strengthened, more effective emergency response.

Logistics

One of the biggest barriers to the response to Katrina was not being able to get supplies quickly into the areas that needed them the most. Of course, during Katrina, the flooded streets and extensive damage to critical infrastructure prevented a lot of supplies from reaching the most heavily damaged areas in a timely fashion.

FEMA employees did the best they could under these conditions with the resources they had. Despite this remarkable effort, FEMA's logistics systems simply were not up to the task of handling a truly catastrophic event. FEMA lacks the technology and information management systems to effectively track shipments and manage inventories.

FEMA also relies on other government agencies like the Department of Transportation – who often serve as agents of FEMA and contract through their extensive network of private sector entities to provide support and move most of the necessary commodities. To be successful in the future, DHS must have some of the same skill sets of 21st century companies and be capable of routinely tracking, monitoring, and dispatching commodities where needed.

Therefore, our first step for strengthening FEMA will be to create a 21st century logistics management system that will require the establishment of a logistics supply chain working with other Federal agencies and the private sector. In the first instance, that means we must put agreements in place before the need arises again to ensure a network of relief products, supplies and transportation support are in place that can be rapidly tracked and managed.

This expanded logistics system will also include a better command and control structure so that FEMA can track shipments and ensure supplies get to the people who need them the most.

Claims Management

Our second major area of improvement will be to upgrade FEMA's claims management systems, including its registration and intake procedures.

It doesn't matter what business you're in – if you can't meet the needs of your customers then you are failing at your job. FEMA's customers are disaster victims. FEMA must be able to identify and communicate with them wherever they are.

What does that mean? FEMA's disaster intake systems cannot be overly burdensome or bureaucratic. They must be able to adjust and scale to the changing needs of disaster populations during surge periods. They also must protect against fraud and abuse.

Therefore, in the immediate future, we will significantly enhance and strengthen FEMA's disaster registration and processing systems, its website, and its 1-800 call-in number – including giving FEMA the capacity to handle up to 200,000 disaster registrations per day. We will also upgrade FEMA's outdated information technology and computer systems.

Of course, not every disaster is the same and different disaster victims have different needs. This often presents some difficult challenges. For example, in most cases, disaster victims who require sheltering can be accommodated within their own communities or at least within their own State. With Katrina, an entire geographic region of our country required sheltering in all 50 states. As a result, FEMA was challenged with a set of victim management challenges that severely tested the capabilities and assumptions of the agency.

In the future, we will both expand and de-centralize FEMA's mass disaster claims management architecture when there is a significant displacement of people. In anticipation of this next hurricane season, we also intend to develop a pilot program for deploying mobile disaster registration trucks to areas where victims have taken shelter, enabling those victims to apply for assistance closer to where they live and work.

Finally, rather than relying primarily on volunteers to provide services in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, FEMA will develop a highly-trained nucleus of permanent employees to serve as its core disaster workforce. Of course, volunteers will always be an important part of the FEMA team, but in the future FEMA must have a larger dedicated disaster workforce that can respond to the unique challenges of surge populations.

Debris Removal

The damage caused by Katrina is without precedent. Although tremendous progress has been made to clear streets and public and private land, we know that debris removal remains one of the biggest ongoing challenges in the Gulf. Debris not only blocks roads, but it also prevents the rebuilding and reconstruction of homes and infrastructure.

At last count, more than 71 million cubic yards of Katrina-related debris has been removed from Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas. But this process, which is labor intensive and often dangerous, is hampered by a complicated contracting and reimbursement process between FEMA, the States, and debris-removal companies.

In the future, we must establish a robust, pre-established contract and response architecture with debris removal companies – cutting out middle-men and ensuring that States are quickly and cost-effectively supported by qualified local debris removal firms. While we envision the states taking a greater and faster role in coordinating debris removal operations, we will continue to count on support from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during those situations, normally in the initial days of a disaster response, when states may be too overwhelmed to effectively initiate and manage debris removal.

Streamlining debris removal will help people and communities recover faster, and it will help FEMA ensure a more coordinated and productive effort on the ground.

Communications

Finally, to address what is commonly known as the “fog of war,” we are creating a hardened set of communications capabilities that will allow DHS, FEMA, and our Federal, State and local partners to gain better situational awareness about conditions and events on the ground as they unfold during a disaster.

What we know from experience is that initial reports are often wrong during a crisis. Furthermore, we know that a powerful storm like Katrina can render even the most sophisticated communications equipment useless if it is not sufficiently hardened. Without an effective ability to communicate or to obtain reliable information, we simply cannot make good decisions.

Therefore, we are providing DHS and FEMA with a robust communications capability for disasters and events. We have begun the process of creating specialized reconnaissance teams from existing Homeland Security assets, including the aerial assets of the Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. This is one of the many benefits of FEMA being part of DHS that will be maximized over time. In addition to these government assets, we intend to take better advantage of aerial and satellite imagery possible from commercial providers. Several of these companies provided imagery that improved our ability to assess damage and estimate the scope of response needed.

These teams will be self-sustaining and will enter a disaster zone, establish emergency communications, and relay vital information back to FEMA and our partners so that we have a better grasp of events and needs, and we can make sound decisions. We will also work to ensure a level of basic interoperability among Federal agencies responding to a disaster, including the Department of Defense.

We are also going to take a look at what we can do within DHS to ensure that our agencies have a common operating picture of events. For example, during Katrina, we often lacked situational awareness because our Homeland Security Operations Center and the FEMA National Response Coordinating Center were located in different places and information did not always flow smoothly between them. I have mandated that we integrate these kinds of incident management functions, so that information is better integrated within DHS and across the Federal government.

Conclusion

These are just some of the initial changes we will be making in the next few months to boost the capabilities of the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA.

Our proposed changes underscore an underlying philosophy and approach to everything we do – which is to address major challenges not as independent, stove-piped agencies, but as a unified team and a national network of partners who share a common goal of protecting our homeland.

As we re-tool the Department and FEMA, we appreciate the ongoing support and participation of Congress and those across the nation who are our partners and will be a critical part of our future success.